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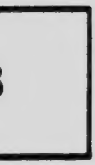

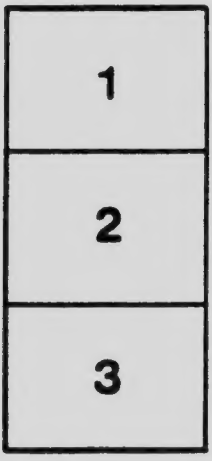

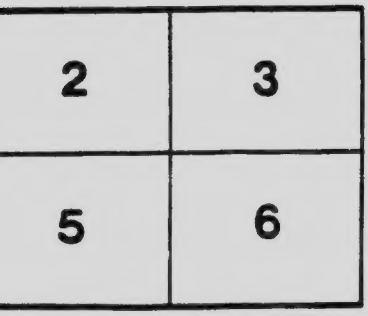

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THE RECENT SESSION

Reviewed by Premier McBride in an Interview with the "News-Advertiser." — Despite Opposition Statements to the Contrary, Much Useful and Important Legislation was Enacted. — The Position on the Railway Question Explained.

The Hon. Richard McBride, K. C., Premier of British Columbia, was in town last week, and during his visit a representative of the "News-Advertiser" interviewed him regarding the work of the past session. As is well known, the Opposition press and some members on the left of the Speaker have endeavored to make out that the work of the Legislature during the past session was of an insignificant and trivial character and of no particular benefit to the Province as a whole.

In answer to a query regarding the Opposition arguments that the session had been a barren one, the Premier said that was a matter on which different views might be held. "In my opinion," said the Premier, "and I am willing and able to prove my assertions, the business transacted by the Legislature during the past session was by far and away more important than is ordinarily the case. In fact, I think this was, in many respects, the

MOST IMPORTANT SESSION OF THE LEGISLATURE

that has been seen in recent years.

Take, for example, the Act amending the Assessment Act. It had been announced by the Government before the session of 1904 ended that a Commission to investigate the matter would be appointed and that no pains would be spared in order to have the subject of taxation fully enquired into. The Hon. F. Carter-Cotton, President of the Council, was Chairman of the Commission, and with the assistance of Hon. R. G. Tatlow, Minister of Finance, and Messrs. J. Buntzen, the Managing Director of the British Columbia Electric Railway Company, and D. R. Ker, the head of the Brackman-Ker Milling Company—both of whom are well known and successful business men—the Commission succeeded in accomplishing the difficult task before it, and its report formed the nucleus of the present Act.

This Act was passed to amend many legitimate grievances against the original Assessment Act passed last year, and to more equitably distribute the additional burdens imposed by that very necessary piece of legislation. That this end has been achieved I think few fair-minded persons will deny. For instance, the rate on personal property

HAS BEEN REDUCED

from one per cent. to two-thirds of one per cent—a reduction of one-third—while the rate on income has been increased. This, I may point out, is in line with the opinions of many expert authorities on fiscal finance, who hold that personal property should not be taxed, and that a larger measure of the burden should be placed on income.

Then, again, the objectionable feature of the taxation of the book debts has been entirely abolished. This form of taxation was very strongly protested against by practically the whole mercantile community, whose credit business is, in general, a large one. I presume they will hardly regard this particular piece of last session's legislation as trivial and unimportant.

Another very noteworthy section of the Act is that providing for the creation of a Board of Assessors, who shall meet at least once a year to consult and decide upon the best methods of securing correct and equitable assessments throughout the Province. This provision is of the utmost importance, being designed to do away with the inequalities and discrepancies in taxaton which were constantly occurring under the old system. Thus, two men might own pieces of land identically similar in size, nature of soil, advantage of position and state of development, yet the assessor in the district where one is situated might value his land at $10 per acre, while his neighbor in the other district, no better circumstanced, would be valued at $100 an acre by the assessor of that district. Such a condition of affairs—by no means infrequent under the old system, and causing much injustice—will, I think, be remedied by the creation of a Board of Assessors, and I consider that this provision should be of the greatest possible benefit to the land owners. I need hardly say that the efficient supervision over our financial affairs, exercised by the Minister of Finance, is mainly responsible for the good standing which the Province of British Columbia enjoys to-day in the money markets of the world."

The attention of the Premier was then called to the

LAND ACT,

which has been attacked in several quarters, the attacks being directed more especially at those sections covering the timber regulations.

When asked the reason for the change in the law regarding timber leases, the Premier said the explanation was an

easy matter. "We found the timber industry considerably depressed from various causes. One principal source of complaint was voiced by the holders of licences, who said that their licences could not be used in the nature of security with the banks and similar financial institutions. This was on the very simple technical ground that, while it has always been the custom to renew the licences from year to year, the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works was nevertheless under no legal obligation to grant such renewal. Now, under the present Act, any licence holders so desiring can have their licences renewable for 16 successive years, but, in order to get this renewal, instead of paying a royalty of 50 cents per thousand, they must pay a royalty of 60 cents per thousand. What this means to the revenue of the Province is that, taking the average cut per acre east of the Cascade Range at 8,000 feet, an increase of 10 cents per thousand will amount to over $50 per acre on royalties; while west of the Cascades, where the cut per acre may be estimated at 15,000 feet, the increase in royalties will mean about $96 per acre.

Moreover," continued Mr. McBride, "the dual system of holding timber lands by leases and licences is abolished, and now all timber lands hereafter acquired will be held on licences renewable for 21 successive years, but subject to such royalties as may from time to time be imposed. The licence fee east of the Cascades is $115 per year for each licence; west of the Cascades it is $140 per year. The area included in one licence must not be greater than one square mile. A

VERY IMPORTANT PROVISION

and one which I think should be given the widest publicity, is that no timber can be cut from lands covered by licences made renewable under this amendment, or under licences hereafter granted, until the land is surveyed; and the Chief Commissioner can require land included in a licence to be surveyed at any time."

When questioned regarding statements that have appeared to the effect that the Land Act, as amended, places the operative millman at the mercy of the speculative holder, who can withhold the raw material from the millman until the latter chooses to pay his price, the Premier replied that nothing could be

WIDER OF THE TRUTH.

"Why," said the Hon. Mr. McBride, "the speculator's chance under the present amended Act is far less than it was before. Under the old system there was practically no limit to the amount of timber land which could be taken up, cases being known of as much as 75,000 acres being applied for. One of the principal beneficial results we claim to obtain by the present amended Act is that its effect will be to get better values for the Province out of our timber areas, in disposing of them in small parcels, similar in size to the timber berths of Ontario and New Brunswick. No one can now take up more than 640 acres on a licence. Undoubtedly the timber values of the Province will, as a consequence, be more closely looked into in the future, and the competition much keener.

I make the statement plainly," continued Mr. McBride, "that if the acquisition of our Crown timber lands were to continue in the next five years, in the same fashion that leases have been taken up in the past five years, we should have practically no timber lands anywhere near our transportation routes. The enormous areas I have just spoken of have been taken up all along our waterways and inlets, and there would soon be nothing left.

As to the charge, therefore, that the amendment to the Act was framed in the interests of timber speculators, I think I have made it pretty plain that such an allegation is

ABSOLUTELY FOUNDATIONLESS.

As an instance of what a section even of the Opposition thought of the amendment, I may point out that both Mr. T. W. Paterson and Mr. Wells had many good things to say about the Act on the floor of the House, and the former gentleman in particular took pains to impress upon the House that this legislation was a move in the right direction. As Mr. Paterson is one of the most prominent timber men on the Coast, it may be presumed that he knew what he was talking about. It would almost be fair, perhaps, to remark here that it is a pity Mr. J. A. Macdonald and his friends should, in order to make a little political capital, go out of their way to contradict statements which have been made in good faith by their colleague, Mr. Paterson."

The

SCHOOL ACT,

which was amended at the last session of the Legislature, was then mentioned, and in reply to a question as to the changes made, Hon. Mr. McBride said that, as stated in the columns of this paper, it had been acknowledged for a number of years past that sooner or later something must be done to relieve the tremendous and ever-increasing burden that is being borne in this connection by the Provincial Treasury. "The establishment of new school districts from year to year, the cost of new buildings and maintenance, as well as teachers' salaries, have been absorbing a very large proportion of the revenue of the country; and, were the present rate of increase to continue, in a very short while it would be far beyond the capacity of the Province to sustain," said the Premier. "It is well-known that, for some years past, people living in incorporated cities have had to subscribe very largely towards the maintenance of their schools; and, in the recent legislation dealing with the matter, the Government has simply asked the people living outside the cities to bear their fair share of the increased

burden in their own districts, in the same degree as their city neighbors do in theirs.

As regards the Opposition's statements of complaints and discontent in the rural districts," continued Mr. McBride, "it is true that, while the question was being discussed in the House, the Opposition press and supporters lost no opportunity of creating strife and misunderstandings as to the aims and necessity of this legislation. Their efforts, however, failed of effect, as the nature and scope of the Bill became more clearly comprehended by the people. I have taken special pains to enquire throughout the country in the rural districts as to the condition of popular sentiment towards the passage of the Bill, and, on all sides, I find that, while additional taxation is never welcome, the people are taking a sensible view of the situation and are perfectly willing to give the assistance required by the new law. And, moreover, a great many residents in the country districts advise me that the effect of the Bill will be to make people take more interest in school affairs. Instead of meetings scantily attended, buildings neglected, and little interest taken generally in educational matters, a new order of things will come about, intelligent attention will be given to this important subject, and education will benefit throughout the Province.

Even members of the Opposition were forced to concede that Mr. Fulton's handling of the subject was masterly and that our present Minister of Education has a most complete grasp of this difficult subject.

The

DYKING ACT

was next mentioned to the Premier and a short explanation of the measure requested, this Bill having been opposed by many on the Opposition side.

"It is quite true that the Dyking Act, introduced and passed at the recent session, caused a great uproar," said the Premier, "but the facts were not known, or otherwise the people would see that the Act was a benefit to the Province.

I will put the state of affairs, which we had to confront in this matter, briefly before you. There has been spent in connection with these dykes no less than over a million dollars. Whether this expenditure has been wisely made or not need not be dealt with here, as the present Provincial Government had no hand in it. But, for nearly the whole period since these works were instituted, there had been practically no return made to the country or this enormous outlay. Assessments have been levied, it is true; but not five per cent. of those due have been paid. Moreover, in addition to this sum, the Government has had to pay the cost of managing and repairing the dykes, thus largely increasing every year the amount already due to the Province.

Past Provincial Governments," continued Mr. McBride, "have consistently evaded the unpleasant responsibility of dealing with this dyking matter. The present administration has simply approached the question from a

BUSINESS STANDPOINT,

with the two-fold object in view of protecting the interests of the Province, and, at the same time, avoiding undue pressure upon those settlers who claimed that they could not make a living out of the lands and pay the heavy annual charges against them.

Now, by the present Act, the cost of management and maintenance will be paid by the people benefited, and a large expenditure annually saved to the Province. Of the original debt, a portion has been wiped out and the payment of the balance spread over a period of 40 years. An exception has been made to this in the case of the Matsqui district, where a number of settlers have recently commenced to make homes. In order to give them a chance to get established, no payment will be required from Matsqui for three years.

The control of the dykes, on account of the large amount due to the Province, is retained in the hands of the Government. If annual payments for maintenance, or on account of original debt, are not met, the lands in default will be sold in the same way as lands are sold for arrears of taxes.

I may say here," added the Premier, "that, in wiping off a considerable amount of the outstanding liability, the Government has in mind the fact that, in 1894, all the protective dyking works erected previous to that date were practically destroyed by the great flood. More than this, the settlers who had, up to that time, attempted to till the land, lost nearly all their household goods as well as much of their stock. In my opinion, the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works deserves great praise for the very satisfactory solution he has found for a most perplexing problem.

The

GAME ACT,

too," continued the Premier, "was a very important piece of legislation, and most distinctly a move in the right direction. I make no extravagant statement when I say that the game of British Columbia is to-day one of its most important and valuable assets. For the reason that but a small proportion of the people interest themselves in the game of the country, there is an apathy displayed in matters relating to this subject which—if not changed—we shall some day greatly regret. What will people think when they are told that, in the State of Maine, the revenues are augmented to the extent of $5,000,000 annually from the game of the country? If one quarter of what is said about the game of British Columbia is true, we have in the confines of our Province a public asset fully equal to, if not exceeding, that of the Eastern State. The present Government, of course, fully recognises that the bona fide prospector, the farmer, the miner and the pathfinder, must

have a right to take what game is necessary for food; and, while our legislation, as at present in force, will lead up to that protection of our game and fish which their value as a public asset demands, at the same time the Government does not propose to enact legislation which will work a hardship to these classes. The Provincial Secretary has given good proof that, in framing the laws of the land in this, as in other respects, he will spare no effort to secure their equitable effect.

With regard to the Supreme Court Act, the County Court Act and the Land Registry Act, and other legal measures emanating from the Attorney-General's department, my conviction is that the public must reap

VERY CONSIDERABLE BENEFIT

from them. The revision of the Supreme Court rules, which is about completed, should prove a boon to litigants, inasmuch as the practice and procedure of this Court will be very much improved, and the trial and settlement of disputes expedited. The County Court Act, too, marks a step in advance. Many years have passed since anything of a radical nature has been attempted in connection with the improvement in our County Court Act. The present Bill, like the one above alluded to, is calculated to expedite the machinery of the law, much red tape, cumbersome precedent and intricate and lengthy procedure having been done away with. It is only justice to say that the work in connection with these legal enactments has been most carefully prepared, and reflects great credit upon the Commission, as well as upon the Attorney-General."

The important question of

IMPROVED RAILWAY COMMUNICATION

was then broached, and the Premier asked if any further progress had been made in the negotiations with the several railway companies.

"With reference to this subject," replied the Premier, "I have nothing to add to my statement made in the House, except, perhaps, to call your attention to the fact that it has been announced that the Dominion Government does not intend to grant any railway subsidies this session. British Columbia has been too generous in the past, and the Government does not intend that exorbitant grants shall be made to any company. I might add, however, that the Government will always be ready to consider proposals for bona fide railway construction so long as the assistance asked is reasonable and does not unduly tax the country's resources."

"Is there anything you can say, Mr. McBride, in regard to the Department of Mines?"

"Well," said the Premier, "the conditions of mining in the Province to-day have

NEVER BEEN MORE PROSPEROUS,

or on a better basis. In fact, I may say that, although many demands were made by the Opposition on the floor of the House that the two per cent. tax should be repealed, I find that no adequate substitute has been offered for this tax, either by the Provincial Mining Association or by the mining operators themselves. Indeed, as regards the latter gentlemen, they seem to be by no means of one mind themselves in regard to the matter—some opposing any change whatever in the existing laws, and others advocating a variety of substitutes with neither coherence or practicability to recommend them. I have, therefore, considered that it will be better, in the interests of the mining industry, to leave the Mineral Act alone. In doing this I may say that I am in accord with the views of practically a majority of the most prominent mining men in the Province, who incline, as I do, to the opinion that the industry will be best served by permitting the laws as they stand today to remain untouched, until conditions demand that some revision should be made. Moreover, this action will be calculated to encourage the intending investor, on whom constant tinkering with and changing of the laws governing any industry in which he invests his money have always a most deterrent effect."

"And now about

BETTER TERMS.

Has anything further occurred in connection with the negotiations with the Dominion Government?"

The Premier smiled as he cautiously considered the question before replying.

"Well, if thoroughly preparing our case, and urging its consideration by the Dominion Government, is headway, we certainly have made it; and I will say in this connection that, as long as this Government remains in power, it will persistently demand from the authorities at Ottawa a readjustment of our financial relations. In doing this," added the Premier, "I confidently look forward to the loyal support of every citizen of the Province, no matter what his politics may be."

In conclusion, the Premier stated that he thought he had given a sufficiently full review of the

WORK OF THE PAST SESSION

to completely refute the unwarranted and very discreditable statements which have been placed in circulation, to the effect that its work has been trivial and of no importance. "I wish most emphatically to repeat," said Mr. McBride, "and I think I have said enough to prove it, that I regard the session just closed as being one of the most important to the interests of this Province that has taken place in many years. It may suit the part of the partisan politician to cast discredit upon himself, as well as upon others, by endeavoring to belittle the work of the Legislature to which he belongs. My colleagues and I can, however, look with confidence to the people for a very different verdict, having kept the welfare of the public and the interests of the Province carefully to the fore."